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Making a difference in educational inequality: reflections from research and practice

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Abstract

This article is a reflective, research-informed, commentary on educational disadvantage from two lecturers in Education who have spent large proportions of their professional lives working in 'DEIS' school settings before transitioning into teacher education. This reflection intends to problematise the concept of educational disadvantage and will then proceed to explore, through literature and some empirical findings, possibilities for changing paradigms of policy and practice in marginalised school settings.

Most research and writing on educational disadvantage in Ireland has focused upon policy, statistics, and the problems that accompany marginalisation. We intend to explore possibilities for change at the level of policy and practice, considering interventions in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; and how we can address inequalities in educational experiences. We will explore possibilities around key areas such as: disrupting 'cultural deficit' theories and fixed ideas of ability related to educational disadvantage; consider nuanced intersectional understandings of inequalities in education; framing 'funds of knowledge' perspectives in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; and encouraging critical pedagogical approaches amongst teachers. We are hopeful that this article will support teachers in schools, researchers and policy makers as they endeavour to make a difference in their work with marginalised communities.

Introduction

In the first instance in this article, we will set about deconstructing 'educational disadvantage' as a concept in Irish education. Our discussion will draw upon contemporary research and literature in order to position the following sections of the article. It is our proposition here that most of attention paid to the issue of educational inequality in Irish educational research has focused upon describing the problem and the effects of same on young people in marginalised communities. We do not claim to be the first to interrogate the concept and indeed there has been a rich, if slight, discourse around looking beyond the 'jaded metaphor' of educational disadvantage and recognising the co-constructed nature of inequality in education (Downes and Gilligan, 2007). In this article we propose a similar shifting of the lens away from the problem and its description, towards how schools, teachers, policy makers and wider educationalists may set about changing the experiences of young people who are being marginalised by the system. We will do this by discussing some thinking tools and approaches that may provide starting points for such conversations. We also recognise recent good work in terms of harvesting the voices of teachers in marginalised school settings where some action-focused propositions have also come to the fore (Jeffers and Lillis, 2021). We will proceed to provide some discussion of what we believe to be important and useful approaches for addressing educational inequalities in schools including: critical pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning; considerations of intersectionality in educational inequality; 'funds of knowledge' approaches to education, as well as the Capabilities Approach (CA) as a way of thinking about education. In the first instance though, we wish to reflect on terminology and 'educational disadvantage' as a descriptor of the issues at hand.

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Deconstructing educational disadvantage

Educational disadvantage, as referred to in the Education Act (1998), serves to amplify a pathologizing view of inequality. In the Education Act (1998, Section 32, 9), 'educational disadvantage' is defined as "impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools". There is also a focus in the act upon corrective language, suggesting educational inequality was an anomaly within an otherwise equitable system that is amenable to 'correction' or fixing by an educational disadvantage committee representing professional interest groups. Although well-intentioned, there are some flaws in thinking here. The Act presents a deficit-oriented view of people living in poverty implying that they are amenable to 'fixing' rather than acknowledging that they are in fact victims of wider ideological motivations that encourage inequalities across aspects of people's lives, including education. Similarly, the view of social and economic disadvantage is rather dated at this stage with intersectional understandings of experience far more prevalent in public and academic discourse (Cahill, 2021). At no point does the act suggest that there are any other parties involved in educational inequality, other than those experiencing it from a position of poverty. As we now know, inequitable opportunities, experiences and outcomes are predicated more upon the garnering of advantage and privilege within a competitive neoliberal system than they are upon the hopes and ambitions for education of those living in poverty (Davies and Bansel, 2007; Angus, 2012). Therein lies the rub – the story of 'educational disadvantage' is as much a story about privilege as it is about poverty.

Educational disadvantage has become a label associated with poverty, underachievement and early school leaving. Similarly, it has served to deflect attention within education, away

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from some of the underlying structural issues that drive educational inequality in the first place, such as income inequality, access to housing and access to the material resources intrinsic to educational achievement, as well as the cultural and social resources that are intentionally aligned with school success (Lynch and Crean, 2018). In many ways, educational disadvantage is about remediating for those who do not fit the system that has been designed by those who it does fit, without changing it in any way that could potentially jeopardise the advantages conferred on those designated to succeed within it. In other words, it is a system invested in reproducing the status quo of what has come before. Of course, reproductive inequalities in education have been persistent and continuous throughout the recent history of universal formal education and schooling, in Ireland and beyond (Jeffers and Lillis, 2021; Fleming and Harford, 2021).

Neoliberalism and accentuating educational inequalities

This separation between privileged subsets of society and those being further marginalised has been exacerbated by neoliberal ideologies that have been enacted through competitive individualism (the points race), commodification (designing school curricula to meet labour demands) and marketisation (school league tables). Neoliberal ideas are predicated upon competition and therefore upon winners and losers in the education game. Educational disadvantage, as it is currently envisioned within the education system feeds this system; it is predicated upon providing additional supports to allow one to compete better within the game as it currently exists without considering changing the rules of the game or indeed the game itself. For every euro that is poured from the public purse into the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) suite of interventions, there are similar euros poured into shadow education and privatised systemic gains through, fee-paying schools, private

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schools, grind cultures and any other means that can be employed to cultivate success within a system that facilitates such inequalities of outcome. Recent work by McCoy and Byrne (2022), using large scale *Growing Up in Ireland* data, emphasises this divide between advantaged sectors of Irish society and the less advantaged sectors as they explore the social reproduction produced by differential access to shadow education. Indeed, as Skerrit and Salokangas (2021) have also purported, the neoliberal turn in education, aligned with Sahlberg's (2021) Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), has prepared the ground for increasing inter-school competition through school league tables, and ever-increasing competitiveness at the level of the individual for third level entry, most particularly to much sought-after high points courses.

These inequalities are also inherent in the debate around opportunity and condition. Policy and practice in Ireland historically, and currently, is focused upon what has been termed 'equality of opportunity' whereas significant change in the experience of education for marginalised populations is far more likely to be served by pursuing policies of 'equality of condition' (Lynch and Baker, 2005). However, this would entail reaching beyond the silo of educational policy and demand coherence within policy decisions in finance, housing, social welfare, higher education and beyond. It would mean shifting away from individualised, hyper-competitive versions of education towards more communal, collaborative and co-operative ideas about what educational access, participation and benefit should look like in twenty-first century Ireland. The political actions required to move us closer to equality of condition in Ireland appear unachievable in the present moment and thus we focus this article on what we can do within the prevailing climate to edge our practices, decisions and

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policies closer to more equitable and inclusive perspectives that will benefit those most marginalised within, and by, the education system.

Innovative and flexible approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment

In this section, we think about the potential for curricular reform and what it might mean for the most marginalised children in our society. In our view and experience, curricular reform presents opportunities for inclusion that are essential to addressing educational inequalities into the future. Post-primary curriculum differentiation interventions in the past have had successful impacts on marginalised students, most particularly the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCAP) and the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP), although not without some concomitant negative consequences also. In relation to the LCAP, Banks *et al.* (2014) highlighted the adverse effects on social class mobility and stratification, whilst also recognising positive student experiences within the programme itself. Similarly, Smyth, McCoy and Banks (2019) signalled positive in-class experiences for learners in terms of feeling supported, authentic experiences such as work experience, and continuous assessment. They did, however, also find some negative aspects relating to negative labelling within the school and the importance of non-recognition of the programme in terms of higher education entry. Gleeson (2021) has also issued us with a word of warning around the wider influences of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) and how we might need to remain vigilant to increasing performativity agendas in education, an issue that can become even more marginalising for students bearing the brunt of systemic inequalities.

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The JCSP, although relatively silent in the research literature, has also been considered a largely positive curriculum differentiation intervention, originally designed as an intervention to address the early school leaving trends, particularly in DEIS schools. Rather than being a curriculum alternative, the JCSP is best understood as a strategic intervention designed to meet the same ends as the junior cycle curriculum. Schools and teachers design supports (initiatives) around key areas such as literacy, numeracy, attendance, motivation and wider school engagement, as well as providing structured target-orientated approaches to curricular areas. DES (2005) conducted a review of the JCSP and found that the programme was having a positive influence in school retention, experiencing success in school, literacy and numeracy development and building bridges between home and school. Similarly, Cassidy (2012) saw significant potential in cross-curricular/ thematic approaches to learning, and literacy development in particular, being successful in JCSP programmes.

In this current moment public discourse in education has become preoccupied with the concept of senior cycle reform and how the school system should react to our changing world. As exemplified by the data feeding school league tables, it would appear that the points system and the related selection of candidates for third level places is also contributing to social stratification in Irish society. Delaney and Devereux (2020) found that there has been a stratification whereby students from more advantaged, middle class second level school settings are more likely to apply and enrol in more selective third level institutions, and indeed in more selective programmes within those institutions. There has been widespread discourse on the 'fairness' of the Leaving Certificate in terms of measuring the academic performance of full-term school leavers in Ireland, and this 'fairness' has most often been cast in any defence to suggested changes to that system. Ultimately, assessment

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processes, particularly in the guise of the Leaving Certificate here in Ireland, have become the tangible reality of the neoliberal commodification of education through competitive individualism, whereby young people and their families compete for limited third level places in elite institutions across the island of Ireland. Inevitably then, because the prizes are so great, the system is open to 'gaming' as people vie with another to find the most strategic route to success. Problematically though, this 'gaming' requires particular knowledges and accessibility to resources that are not equally available to all students. Therefore, the education system, and particularly the system of assessment is implicated in the cultural and social stratification produced by the interplay of Bourdieuan 'capitals', as deployed with the education system (Bourdieu, 1986). All too often then, the most marginalised children find themselves unable to compete with their more privileged peers. This stratification is extremely problematic from a social justice perspective and certainly calls into question, the aforementioned 'fairness' of a system that seems to systematically disadvantage and exclude less wealthy sections of the population (Curtin *et al.* 2019). Therefore, current research and review of senior cycle education in Ireland does, and needs to remain so, cognisant of the wider potential impact of reform (NCCA, 2022). There is also potential for thinking differently about curriculum across the lifespan of children in schools and perhaps an alignment with 'funds of knowledge' approaches may well be a consideration of how we approach curriculum, pedagogy and assessment into the future.

Disrupting 'cultural deficit theories' through a 'funds of knowledge' approach

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O'Sullivan (2005) pointed to the propensity within the Irish education system for assuming a view of 'cultural deficits' when thinking about issues of access, participation and benefit. In essence, the assumption being that some children and families do not have the requisite cultural resources to succeed within the education system as there is a cultural dissonance between their background, experiences and knowledge in terms of what is valued and assessed in school. O'Sullivan (2005) offered a comprehensive understanding of widespread discourses around educability and how it related to educational inequality. He defined the central perspectives as relating to constitutional limitation, material condition, personal 'deficit', cultural 'deficit' and political economy as separate perspectives on how educational inequality is viewed. Many of these perspectives relate to issues and views that are societally constructed and maintained and thus may not be in the gift of the school or the teacher to intervene in meaningful ways. The intention here is not to disregard school or teacher agency but rather to focus in upon actions that may have a more immediate impact on the experiences of children. As such, what is discussed here is a proposal for disrupting the cultural 'deficit' perspective on school experience and creating consonance rather than dissonance between the life-worlds of children and their interactions with the school and the curriculum.

Taking a 'funds of knowledge' (FoK) perspective may have some potential for us here in Ireland, particularly in the context of curricular reform where there may be opportunities to develop more flexible and agile approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez, 1992). In essence, the FoK perspective seeks to build consonances and connections between the in-school world and out-of-school knowledges and experiences of people who may be disenfranchised by the culturally straitened nature

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of the system as it is currently designed. In terms of curriculum design then, this may mean providing far more flexibility in terms of content, pedagogical methods and indeed modes of assessment. Moll *et al.*'s (1992) original research involved anthropological investigations of the households of pupils and endeavouring to make connections between the world of the child's home and the world of the school. Indeed, in their own words Gonzalez *et al.*'s (1992, 11) research set about "debunking the pervasive idea of working-class minority households as lacking worthwhile knowledge and experiences" and exploring the transformative education possibilities available through connecting home and school. It is our belief that challenging ourselves as reflective practitioners to make these connections is a fertile space for development for teachers interested in addressing issues of educational inequalities in the pedagogy. Other scholars have developed the FoK perspective further. For example, Estaban-Guitart and Moll (2014) have developed the concept to include identity in recognition of the sociocultural, historical and subjective nature of knowledge and understanding. Knowledge cannot be assumed to be a singular objective reality that is neutral of influence from the standpoints and situatedness of people's lived experiences, and as such it is vital for teachers in schools to draw upon the life-worlds, knowledges and identities of the children they are teaching with the purpose of cultivating a shared recognition and value of the world inhabited by the children and their families. Sometimes, as mentioned earlier, there is a danger that we dismiss the world beyond the school as 'less than' and as 'other' from the world of the formal school curriculum and experience that has developed such significant value in our modern society. Relatedly then, this shift in perspective and value may allow us to consider the possibilities and opportunities presented

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by the social, cultural and historical backgrounds of children in school, and thus lend itself to seeing capabilities and strengths rather than deficits and shortcomings.

Adopting a capabilities approach/ strengths-based approach

In order to move away from implicit deficit orientations to educational inequality, we propose consideration of Amartya Sen's and Martha Nussbaum's contributions to the Capabilities Approach (CA). Indeed, the CA approach also has a lot to offer in terms of re-framing national ideology and policy and how education and economic performance are perceived to be intrinsically linked. Unterhalter (2009, 212) has summarised what a CA approach means as:

the value of an economy does not lie in economic growth but in its capacity to provide opportunities for human flourishing, i.e. for each human being to live a life [s]he has 'reason to choose and value'.

This is an important consideration in terms of how, as we have already discussed, neoliberal and marketised perspectives have come to the fore in terms of generating inequalities in education in Ireland. We are concerned here with what education can do in terms of providing these opportunities for flourishing to those students who are most marginalised within the system. For us then, CA has very significant potential for educators at all levels in our system (Nussbaum, 2001). Sen, as the progenitive voice in CA, has stated that capabilities are not easily captured within a list, and that how we conceive of capabilities is always contingent on wider cultural, social and economic factors, and also contingent upon the purpose of the CA approach. For example, the CA approach has been put to very

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significant use within fields such as human development and globalised perspectives on poverty (Sen, 1990; 2006). In this article, we believe the CA approach allows educators and researchers to assume a social justice approach to educational inequality whilst simultaneously adapting an outlook of possibilities that has the potential to counterbalance a drift towards deficit-thinking in education. As stated earlier, how capabilities are conceived of in our context, is contingent upon our own cultural, social and economic 'beings' that frame possibilities for children in terms of their experiences of education. Martha Nussbaum, similar to Sen, has constructed the CA as a tool of social justice, equality and human rights. However, Nussbaum has endeavoured to make CA even more tangible through listing what these capabilities might include. Nussbaum (2003, 41-42) names the following key areas of consideration within CA:

- Life
- Bodily Health
- Bodily Integrity
- Senses, Imagination and Thought
- Emotions
- Practical Reason
- Affiliation
- Other Species
- Play
- Control over one's Environment

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It is our view that many (if not all) of these ideas within CA have potential as analytical ideas and indeed as aspirations for addressing educational inequalities here in Ireland. We acknowledge that CA has been applied readily to analysis of global human development and gender-based economic inequalities but we propose such a focus could be of very tangible benefit to policy, practice and research here in Ireland also. Molla and Pham (2019, 577) proposed that using CA in conjunction with Bourdieu's capital theory provides a useful lens for education by also foregrounding "an ethical dimension of social justice by accounting for individuals' values and goals in policies that seek to improve the opportunities and processes for disadvantaged students." This focus on ethical and moral commitments to educational inequality is important; it helps us to navigate the everyday nature of educational inequality and focus on concrete outcomes in terms of moving towards more equal versions of experience for marginalised students. There is a danger that society can expunge itself of responsibility through policy discourse. For example, we may applaud ourselves (societally) for DEIS as a successful policy intervention without considering the persistence of class-based inequalities of experience and outcome for marginalised students. The ethical lens may help us to be more grounded in this regard. The CA approach also helps us to think about the 'beings' and 'doings' of students as well as developing possibilities and aspirations (Sen, 1992). Our experiences have taught us that shifting our thinking towards what is possible, rather than focusing on what is impossible is a most useful philosophy for educators working in marginalised communities.

Intersectional understandings of educational inequality

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In recent times research, practice and policy has been striving to reach more nuanced and intersectional understanding of inequality and we think this is a very important lens to bring to bear on educational inequality. Essentially, intersectionality acknowledges that there is no uniformity of experience based on arbitrary labels of identity such as social class, gender, race / ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, religion, sexuality and nationality but rather a uniqueness of experience based on how various aspects of our identities intersect with one another. Like many other ideas, intersectionality began with a narrower understanding than is now currently the case. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) initially conceptualised intersectionality as a way of understanding the experiences of black women's access to employment and indeed their experiences of violence. From there, the concept has helped us to take a more nuanced view of identity and experience across different aspects of people's lives. The core identity aspects of race, class and gender are most commonly central to intersectional studies (Liasidou, 2013). More recently, intersectional explorations of issues relating to disability and inclusion have become more common (Thomas and Macnab, 2022; Cahill, 2021). In terms of how we conceive of, and address, educational inequalities then, intersectionality helps us in terms of how we think about extant issues such as how boys and girls may experience educational inequality differently; how migrant children have a different experience based on their social class position or how ethnic minorities such as travellers have different experiences of education based on other factors such as gender and/or (dis)ability. Similarly, an intersectional understanding can help us to understand advantage and privilege within the system, such as that conferred upon white-Irish middle class males and females and the cultural consonance for them within the education system. Intersectional perspectives help us to disavow sociologically blind meritocratic views of

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education. Of course, Thomas and Macnab (2022) also remind us not to fall foul of stereotypical thinking resulting from attributing outcomes or beliefs with any of these sociological attributes ('fundamental attribution error'), and instead to take closer account of the situation people find themselves in. This is important. Issues of access, participation and benefit should not be attributed to the people themselves but rather to the world, the society and the political economy that has made manifest the conditions of inequality that influence engagement and experience within the education system. From the perspective of addressing educational inequality however, intersectionality helps us to see beyond labels associated with identity markers such as gender, class and race in order to think about the child in a more holistic manner.

Critical pedagogical approaches

The necessity to keep the critical light burning became very obvious to one of the authors here in an interaction with senior education academics quite recently, where one colleague commented that 'there's too much of that critical perspective in education, why can't people just see the happy side of life'. As idealistic and wonderful as this statement sounds, one would have to be concerned at the dismissal of the impact of poverty, societal inequalities and related traumas on the educational experiences of young people. Perhaps there are leafy glades where the impact of societal inequalities does not manifest itself in the daily lives of students and teachers, but these authors have not experienced them. In one sense, such conversations are indicative of a 'neoliberal creep' within education where

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there is a tendency to erase narratives that may make one feel uncomfortable in one's privileged circumstances as an educator, or indeed a policy maker. The 'lived reality' of educational inequality tends to be more complex and challenging than we are sometimes led to believe, as has been emphasised in Fleming's most recent study (Hyland, 2022; Fleming, 2020).

Critical approaches to addressing educational inequality at the classroom level, and indeed beyond, have significant potential in terms of creating activist and agentic perspectives amongst teachers, students and communities. Criticality in terms of social justice and disrupting reproductive actions in education is a complex issue, given the possibilities of dissonance between teachers / policy makers and the communities they may be serving in terms of social class background (Keane and Heinz, 2015; Keane et al., 2020). Many critical approaches to education have their roots in a Freirean praxis where education is viewed as a vehicle for societal re-organisation through resistance to the various oppressions imposed upon populations by capitalist ideologies that foster reproductions of privilege and advantage through education (Freire, 1970; Bourdieu 1990). Indeed, it is through this praxis, and critical consciousness (*conscientização*) that Freire views hope and possibility rather than a fatalistic vision for social class inequalities (Freire, 1992). Henry Giroux's (2021, 3) recent introduction to Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope* encourages us to seek out:

new challenges and opportunities to make politics, hope and education central to the challenge of rethinking politics and the possibilities of collective agency and resistance

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We are not declaring that the responsibility for turning the tide of educational inequality lies solely with schools and pedagogical approaches. Similarly, Lupton and Hempel-Jorgenson (2012, 601) recognised that teachers and school cannot act in isolation for social transformation in the “absence of more substantial societal distribution of power and wealth”. We are saying though, like Giroux and Freire, that the orientation of educators towards agency and activism has the potential to be impactful on some levels as we seek to instigate more equal circumstances for citizens of the state. McLaren (2020, 1246) captures this idea well by emphasising the importance of teachers who can ‘assume the role of public intellectuals’, connecting the world of the classroom and the curriculum with the wider circumstances of young people’s worlds and the endeavour of acting for change in an increasingly unequal world.

Critical pedagogical approaches then, serve as a necessity in terms of developing learner-centred, genuine, connected and transformative experiences for marginalised children in schools. Devine and McGillicuddy (2016) conceived of pedagogical habitus as a useful concept for unpacking how pedagogy has a powerful positioning function for children and teachers, and encourage us to take a rights-orientated perspective to our views on pedagogy. This rights-based view is borne out of a finding of concern for migrant children and boys in working class communities. Our own research around pedagogy and adolescent literacy development found similar disparities between pedagogical practices that appeared to have a distinct classed element to them, whereby DEIS schools in our study, and those practicing streaming of classes based on ability, tended to offer distinctly limited pedagogical experiences to weaker streams, when in fact the literature in the area would suggest that these children are the very cohort who require more thoughtful pedagogical

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practices (Cahill *et al.*, 2017). The findings from our research suggested that children in higher streams were more likely to be engaged with active learning, inquiry-based methods, talk-based learning, project-based learning and experiential learning; whereas lower ability streamed environments were more likely to be focused on rote learning, transcription, silence and didactic approaches to pedagogy. We are not alone in these findings (see also Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015). Ultimately, based on our own research, our experiences as teachers and our more recent experiences as teacher-educators, we see potential for change in terms of how we conceive of pedagogy within our practice to at least create conditions for change and transformation. Teachers who inspire, challenge and create active citizens in the classroom are essentially opening up these possibilities for change in a system that often encourages the opposite (conformity, sameness and reproduction).

Concluding thoughts

Experiences and outcomes from education in Ireland, similar to the rest of the world, demonstrate the centrality of social class position in terms of inequality. What we have proposed here is a menu of conceptual tools and ideas that may help teachers, researchers and teacher educators to orientate our view towards an activist and possibilities-based view of our work. We absolutely acknowledge the wider systemic issues that cast a shadow over educational experiences for marginalised children, most particularly wealth inequalities, housing policy, health policy, employment opportunities and systemic rigidity within education. Nevertheless, as teacher educators we felt compelled also to look at what research and theory could offer us in terms of developing capabilities and possibilities for children experiencing marginalisation from education.

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We acknowledge that addressing the transformative potential of educational experiences is both challenging and complex. Societal inequalities have produced some school spaces as sites of concentration in terms of trauma, disengagement, frustration and experiences of failure. It is not our claim that pedagogical approaches alone can counter-balance such influences but rather that they can offer some hope, some positive action and some impetus for future transformation of experiences in education and wider society. This has become even more important in our post-truth era where the reality of educational inequality is subverted by discourses of denial, individualisation of blame and a retreat into the fatalistic stance of late capitalism (Dadvand, Cahill and Zembylas, 2021).

In this article we have attempted to offer some perspectives that may encourage, inspire and assist educationalists at all stages and positions to consider perspectives on inequality, social justice, critical pedagogy and intersectionality in their work with young people in marginalised communities. Our best hopes are that the article proves helpful, to some extent, in understanding the complex nature of educational inequalities and how we can have at least some agency as individual actors and groups in terms of acting for change.

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